

Variety, USA

January 28, 2018 5:37PM PT

Sundance Film Review: 'A Kid Like Jake'

In this too polite drama, Claire Danes stars as an anxious mother debating whether to capitalize on her 4-year-old's gender identity.

By Amy Nicholson

Director: Silas Howard

With: Claire Danes, Jim Parsons, Octavia Spencer, Priyanka Chopra, Ann Dowd, Amy Landecker.

1 hour 32 minutes

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What is "A Kid Like Jake" like? In Silas Howard's drama, adapted by Daniel Pearl from his own 2013 play, 4-year-old Jake (Leo James Davis) is creative, stubborn, and smart — qualities that aren't special enough to guarantee a scholarship to a competitive New York private school. Jake's also transgender, maybe, or as his preschool advisor Judy (Octavia Spencer) describes him, "gender expansive." Judy suggests Jake's parents Alex and Greg (Claire Danes and Jim Parsons) include his princess play in their applications, the first pebble in what slowly becomes an emotional avalanche that threatens their marriage.

Howard's film is adamantly realistic, which means everyone behaves as politely as possible until hell breaks loose in the final act. The movie doesn't feel like it's going anywhere until it explodes, and the dazzling fireworks don't quite offset its long, seemingly aimless fuse. It's a credible portrait of two good people fumbling with a dilemma: Should Jake be given a label he's yet to request? The script's central irony is that while angry kids are ordered to use their words, adults talk endlessly without ever saying what they mean. The same goes for the film, which starts a conversation it doesn't fully dare to explore.

Alex and Greg start the film as one of those sun-dappled city couples who smooch in bed without fear of morning breath. He's a therapist; she's a lawyer-turned-stay-at-home-mom — or as her wholly awful mom Catherine (Ann Dowd) would say, a disappointment. ("Thank God for the women's movement," Cathy groans, just lightly enough she can pretend it's a joke.) Still, the Wheelers seems so happily middle class with their two-story home and kombucha dates that the audience blinks when the couple reveals they can't afford to pay for private school.

Their desperation for financial aid doesn't translate. But even if they were rich, Jake would still have to beat out hundreds of other kids with perfect test scores or perfect pitch. Adding to

the ludicrousness, notes Howard, Jake and his academic rivals are so young and vague that any misstep is an instant future-killer. Sighs another mom in one of the film's funniest moments, at her son's kindergarten audition, Jake crayoned a picture of a gun.

However, these schools are looking for diversity. Which means if the Wheelers are willing to flaunt Jake's obsession with pretending to be the Little Mermaid and the toilet-paper skirts he fashions for himself at home, his odds of acceptance might jump. Alex bristles at Judy's advice, and Greg's follow-up desire to put Jake in therapy in case he needs a safe place to talk. Alex is fine if Jake is transgender, but she's not comfortable defining her son this early. There's a hint that she, too, has been defined as a quitter since childhood when she dropped ballet — an idea Howard floats so lightly, it might not even be there, along with most ideas in the script which seem to waft by as we cling to vapors.

Despite Danes' visible effort, her character never quite congeals. At first, she's a simply a stereotype: the stressed-out mother who packs granola snacks and does her best to smile. She's far more interesting once Howard cracks her composure and she says things she knows she's not supposed to say. We're jolted by what comes out of her mouth in part because there's not much hint of what's roiling inside. One scene climaxes in an insult regarding information about Judy we barely registered — the line is a whiff. Later, Alex furiously reveals her own stereotypical gender biases to her husband. It's a big moment, and by the next scene, the subject is dropped.

Alex's frustrations with calm, analytic Greg are relatable. He's so steady that at a dinner scene, when Alex snipes that he's "had a little too much to drink," to us, he seems exactly the same. They're dining with their friend Amal (Priyanka Chopra), a charming presence who slips in and out of the movie without having a compelling reason to be in it. Same with the very funny Amy Landecker who has several great bits as one of Greg's clients, but seems to be written in mostly to pad out the running time. Landecker is the best thing in the movie. Yet it's a strange choice to stick her character in for laughs and then rush through the ending, unless the film's point is that the energy spent worrying about a problem is 10 times more important than the solution.

"A Kid Like Jake" originated as an off-Broadway play, which is why it doesn't entrust many lines to the 4-year-old at the center of the film. (On stage, the character wasn't there at all.) Here, we at least get to see him grinning in his pink tutus and throwing a fit when Alex buys him a traditionally male Halloween costume instead of the Ariel fishtail and fins he demanded. Mostly, though, Jake is merely talked about while he plays in the next room. Jake's faint presence works with the tenor of the film — if the audience got to know the kid better, we'd be tempted to wade in and answer Alex and Greg's questions ourselves. Yet, he also feels like an afterthought in his own story, the spoke at the center of a conversation that's simply spinning its wheels.

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Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (Premieres), Jan. 27, 2018. Running time: 92 MIN.

Production: A Burn Later Productions, That's Wonderful Prods. presentation of a Double Nickel Entertainment, Bankside Films, Head Gear Films production, in association with Metrol Technology, XS Media. (International sales: CAA, Los Angeles.) Producers: Jim Parsons, Todd Spiewak, Eric Norsoph, Paul Bernon, Rachel Song. Co-producers: Veronica Nickel, David Chan. Executive producers: Jenette Kahn, Adam Richman, David Bernon, Sam Slater, Jackie Bernon, Rowan Riley, Phil Hunt, Compton Ross, Hilary Davis, Stephen Kelliher, Patrick Howson, David Gendron, Ali Jazayeri.

Crew: Director: Silas Howard. Screenwriter: Daniel Pearle. Camera (color): Steven Capitano Calitri. Editor: Michael Taylor. Music: Roger Neill.

With: Claire Danes, Jim Parsons, Octavia Spencer, Priyanka Chopra, Ann Dowd, Amy Landecker.

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